

SERIAL STORY

The Sable Lorcha

—BY—
Horace Hazeltine

CHAPTER I.

The Vanishing Portrait.

Evelyn Grayson, meeting me on the old Boston Post Road, between Greenwich and Stamford, gave me a message from her uncle. That is the logical beginning of this story; though to make everything quite clear from the start it may be better to hark back a few months, to the day on which Evelyn Grayson and I first met.

Then, as now, we were each driving our own car; she, a great sixty-horsepower machine, all glistering pale yellow, and I, a compact six-cylinder racer, of dull dusty gray. But we were not on any such broad, roomy thoroughfare as the Boston Post Road. On the contrary we were short-cutting through a narrow, rough lane, beset by stone walls and interrupted at intervals by a series of sharp and treacherous angles.

I know I shall never forget the momentary impression I received. Out of the golden sunlight, it seemed to me, there had emerged suddenly a tableau of Queen Titania on a topaz throne—the fairest Queen Titania imagination ever conjured—and I, in my mad, panting speed was about to crash into the gauzy fabric of that dream creation and rend it with brutal, torturing onrush of relentless, hard-driven nickel steel. I take no credit to myself for what I did. Volition was absent. My hands acted on an impulse above and beyond all tardy mental guidance. For just a flashing instant the gray nose of my car rose before me, as in strenuous assault it mounted half way to the coping of the roadside wall. I felt my seat dart away from beneath me, was conscious of my body in swift, unsupported aerial flight, and then—but it is idle to attempt to set down the conglomerate sensations of that small fraction of a second. When I regained consciousness, Queen Titania was kneeling in the dust of the lane beside me—a very distressed and anxious Queen Titania, with wide, startled eyes, and quivering sympathetic lips—and about us were a half dozen or more of the vicinal country folk.

Between that meeting in mid-May and this meeting on the old Boston Post Road in mid-September, there had been others, of course; for Queen Titania, whose every-day name, as I have said, was Evelyn Grayson, was the niece and ward of my nearest neighbor, Mr. Robert Cameron, a gentleman recently come to reside on what for a century and more had been known as the old Townsburry Estate, extending for quite a mile along the Connecticut shore of Long Island Sound in the neighborhood of Greenwich.

The intervening four months had witnessed the gradual growth of as near an approach to intimacy between Cameron and myself as was possible considering the manner of man that Cameron was. By which statement I mean to imply naught to my neighbor's discredit. He was in all respects admirable—a gentleman of education and culture, widely traveled, of exalted ideals and noble principles to which he gave rigid adherence. But—I was about to qualify this by describing him as reserved and taciturn. I fear, though, to give a wrong impression. He was scarcely that. There were moments, however, when he was unresponsive, and he was never demonstrative. He had more poise than any man I know. He allowed you to see just so much of him, and no more. At times he was almost stubbornly reticent. And yet, in spite of these qualities, which appeared to be cultivated rather than inherent, he gave repeated evidence of a nature at once so simple and kindly and sympathetic as to command both confidence and affection.

To the progress of my intimacy with Evelyn there had been no such temperamental impediment. She was fearlessly outspoken, with a frankness born of unpolished innocence; barely six weeks having elapsed between her graduation from the tiny French convent of Sainte Barbe near Paris and our perilous encounter in that contracted, treacherous, yet blessed little Connecticut lane. And she possessed,

moreover, a multiplicity of additional charms, both of person and disposition—charms too numerous indeed to enumerate, and far too sacred to discuss. From which it may rightly be inferred that we understood each other, Evelyn and I, and that we were already considerably beyond the state or condition of mere formal acquaintanceship.

It was no Queen Titania who now came gliding to a stand beside me on the broad, level, well-oiled highway, under a double row of arching elms. It was no gossamer fairy, but Hebe, the Goddess of Youth, with creamy skin and red lips and a lilting melody of voice.

"What ho, Sir Phillip! We are well met!"

And then she told me that her Uncle Robert had telephoned for me, leaving a message with my man, bidding me come to him at my earliest leisure. "Why not come for dinner?" she added; and her eyes gave assent to her words.

"But you?" I queried; for her car was headed in the opposite direction.

"I am going alone to Norton. I have a hamper in the tonneau for that poor O'Malley family. I shall be back in time. We dine at half-past seven, you know. You'll come?"

"Of course I'll come," I answered her. I think she must have heard more in my voice than the simple words, for her lids drooped, for just a breath, and the color flamed sudden below her lowered lashes.

But, after all, I saw very little of her that evening. It is true that she sat on my right at table, piquantly, youthfully beautiful in the softly tinted light which filtered through the pink and silver filigree candle-shades, but the atmosphere of the dinner was tinged by a vague, unreasoning constraint as from some ominously brooding yet undefinable influence which overhung the three of us. And when the coffee and liqueurs were served, employing some slender pretext for her going, she bade us good-night, and left us, not to return.

In justice to Cameron, I must add that he appeared least affected by—and certainly in no wise responsible for—the pervading inefficacy. He had been, indeed, rather less demure than was often his wont, chatting with almost glibety concerning Evelyn's new role of Lady Bountiful and of her Norton benefices. As for the subject upon which he desired to consult me, it had not been so much as mentioned; so in looking back, it seems impossible that matters of which neither Evelyn nor I was at the time informed could have exerted an effect, save through Cameron's undetected, subconscious inducement.

Even after his niece had withdrawn, Cameron continued for a time to discuss with me topics of general and public, rather than personal, import. He spoke, I remember, of a series of articles on "The Commercial Resources of the United States," the publication of which had just begun in *The Week*, of which I am owner and editor; and though I fancied at first that it might be in this connection he wished to consult me, I very soon discerned that he was merely using a text for certain views of his own on the conservation and development of the country's timber supply.

Meanwhile my curiosity grew keener. It was natural, I suppose, that I should fancy Evelyn involved in some way. In fact I then attributed the depression during dinner to her knowledge of what her uncle and guardian purposed to say to me. Likewise I found in this conception the reason for her sudden and unusual desertion. Hitherto when I had dined here Evelyn had remained with us while we smoked our cigarettes, leading us at length to the music room, where for a glad half-hour the rich melody of her youthful sweet contralto voice mingled in pleasing harmony with her own piano accompaniment.

And while I vainly made effort to imagine wherein I might have laid myself open to the disapproval of this most punctilious of guardians—for I expected nothing less than a studiously polite reference to some shortcoming of which I had been unwittingly guilty—I momentarily lost track of my host's discourse. Emerging from my abstraction it was with a measure of relief that I heard him saying:

"I think you told me once, Clyde, that you rather prided yourself on your ability to get a line on one's character from his handwriting. That's why I telephoned for you this afternoon. I have received an anonymous letter."

He was leaning forward, a little constrainedly, his left hand gripping the arm of his chair, the fingers of his right hand toying with the stem of his gold-rimmed Bohemian liqueur glass.

"An anonymous letter!" I repeated, with a deprecatory smile. "Anonymous letters should be burned and forgotten. Surely you're not bothering about the writer?"

I wish I could put before you an exact reproduction of Cameron's face as I then saw it; those rugged outlines, the heritage of Scottish ancestry, softened and refined by a brilliant intellectuality; the sturdy chin and square

jaw; the heavy underly meeting the upper in a strongly perceptible curve; the broad, heavily nose; the small, but alert, gray eyes, shining through the round lenses of his spectacles; the high, broad, sloping white brow and the receding border of dark brown, slightly grizzled hair. That, superficially, was the face. But I saw more than that. In the visage of one naturally brave I saw a battle waged behind a mask—a battle between courage and fear; and I saw fear win.

Then the mask became opaque once more, and Cameron, giving me a smile for smile, was replying.

"There are anonymous letters and anonymous letters. Ordinarily your method is the one I should pursue. Indeed I may say that when, about a month or so ago, I received a communication of that character, I did almost precisely what you now advise. Certainly I followed one-half of your prescription—I forgot the letter; though, for lack of fire in the dog days, I did not burn it, but thrust it into a drawer with an accumulation of advertising circulars."

My apprehension lest Evelyn and I were personally affected had been by now quite dissipated. It was perfectly apparent to me that Cameron alone was involved; yet my anxiety was none the less eager. Already my sympathy and co-operation were enlisted. I could only hope that he had mentally exaggerated the gravity of the situation, yet my judgment of him was that his inclination would be to err in the opposite direction.

"And now something has happened to recall it to your memory?"

"Something happened very shortly after its receipt," he replied. "Something very puzzling. But in spite of that, I was inclined to treat the matter as a bit of clever chicanery, devised for the purpose, probably, of extortion. As such, I again put it from my thoughts; but today I received a second letter, and I admit I am interested. The affair has features which make it, indeed, uncommonly perplexing."

I fear my imagination was sluggish. Although, in spite of his dissemblance, I saw that he was strangely moved by these happenings, I could fancy no very terrifying concomitants of the rather commonplace facts he had narrated. For anonymous letters I had ever held scant respect. An ambushed enemy, I argued, is admittedly a coward. And so I was in danger of growing impatient.

"When the second letter came," he continued, bringing his left hand forward to join his right on the dazzling white ground of the table's damask, "I searched among the circulars for the first, and found it. I want you to see them both. The writing is very curious—I have never seen anything just like it—and the signature, if I may call it that, is still more singular. On the first letter, I took it for a blot. But on the second letter occurs the same black blur or smudge of identical outline."

Of course I thought of the Black Hand. It was the natural corollary, seeing that the newspapers had been giving us a surfeit of Black Hand threats and Black Hand outrages. But, somehow, I did not dare to voice it. To have suggested anything so ordinary to Cameron in his present mood would have been to offer him offense.

And when, at the next moment, he drew from an inner pocket of his evening coat two thin, wax-like sheets of paper and passed them to me, I was glad that I had kept silence. For the letters were no rough, rude scrawls of an illiterate Mafia or Camorra. In phraseology as well as in penmanship they were impressively unique.

"If you don't mind," Cameron was saying, "you might read them aloud."

He rose and switched on a group of electric wall lights at my back, and I marked for the hundredth time his physique—his towering height, his powerful shoulders, his leanness of hip and sturdy straightness of limb. He did not look the forty years to which he confessed.

One of the long French windows which gave upon the terrace stood ajar, and before resuming his seat Cameron paused to close it, dropping over it the looped curtains of silver gray velvet that matched the walls.

In the succeeding moment the room was ghostly silent; and then, breaking against the stillness, was the sound of my voice, reading:

"That which you have wrought shall in turn be wrought upon you. Take warning therefore of what shall happen on the seventh day hence. As sun follows sun, so follows all that is decreed. The ways of our God are many. On the righteous he showers blessings; on the evil he pours misery."

That was the first letter. The second began with the same sentence:

"That which you have wrought shall in turn be wrought upon you."

But there, though the similarity of tenor continued, the verbal identity ceased. It went on:

"Once more, as earnest of what is decreed, there will be shown unto you a symbol of our power. Precaution cannot avail. Fine words and a smiling countenance make no virtue. And beneath each letter was the

strange silhouette which Cameron had mentioned.

It is difficult for me to convey the most meager idea of the emotional influence which these two brief communications exerted. They seemed to breathe a grim spirit of implacable Nemesis far in excess of anything to be found in the euphemism of the written words.

When I had finished the reading of them aloud, Cameron, leaning far back in his chair, sat silently thoughtful, his eyes narrowed behind his glasses, but fixed apparently upon the lights behind me. And so, reluctant to interrupt his reverie, I started to read them through again slowly, this time to myself, fixing each sentence indelibly in mind as I proceeded. But before I had quite come to the end, my companion was speaking.

"Well?" he said. And the light cheerfulness of his tone was not only in marked contrast with his grave absorption of a moment before, but in jarring discord with my own present mood. "Well? What do you make of them?"

My annoyance found voice in my response.

"Cameron," I begged, "for God's sake be serious. This doesn't seem to me exactly a matter to be merry over. I don't want to alarm you, but somehow I feel that these—" and I shook the crackling, wax-like sheets, "these cannot be utterly ignored."

"But they are anonymous," he retorted, not unjustly. "Anonymous letters should be burned and forgotten."

"There are anonymous letters and anonymous letters," I gave him back, in turn. "These are of an unusually convincing character. Besides, they—" And then I paused. I wished to tell him of that elusive encompassment of sinister portent which had so impressed me; of that malign foreboding beyond anything warranted by the words; but I stumbled in the effort at expression. "Besides," I started again, and ended lamely, "I don't like the look and the feel of them."

And now he was as serious as I could wish.

"Ah!" he cried, leaning forward again and reaching for the letters. "You have experienced it, too! And you can't explain it, any more than I? It is something that grips you when you read, like an icy hand, hard as steel, in a glove of velvet. It's always between the lines, reaching out, and nothing you can do will stay it. I thought at first I imagined it, but the oftener I have read, the more I have felt its clutch. The letters of themselves are nothing. What do you suppose I care for veiled threats of that sort? I'm big enough to take care of myself, Clyde. I've met peril in about every possible guise, in every part of the world, and I've never really known fear. But this—this is different. And the worst of it is, I don't know why. I can't for the life of me make out what it is I'm afraid of."

He had gone very pale, and his strong, capable hands, which toyed with the two letters, quivered and twitched in excess of nervous tension. Then, with a finger pointing to the ink-stain at the bottom of one of the sheets, he asked:

"What does that look like to you?"

I took the letter from him, and scrutinized the rude figure with concentrated attention for a moment, venturing the suggestion that it somewhat resembled a boat.

"A one-masted vessel, square-rigged," he added, in elucidation.

"Exactly."

"Now turn it upside down."

I did so.

"Now what do you see?"

"The head of a man wearing a helmet." The resemblance was very marked.

"A straw helmet, apparently," he amplified, "such as is worn in the Orient. And yet the profile is not that of an Oriental. Now, look at your vessel again." And once more I reversed the sheet of paper.

"Can it be a Chinese junk?" I asked.

"It might be a sailing proa or banca," he returned, "such as they use in the South Pacific. But whatever it is, I can't understand what it has to do with me or I with it."

I was still studying the black daub, when he said:

"But you haven't told me about the handwriting. What can you read of the character of the writer?"

"Nothing," I answered, promptly. "It is curious penmanship, as you say—heavy and regular and upright, with some strangely formed letters; especially the f's and the p's; but it tells me nothing."

"But I thought—" he began.

"That I boasted? So I did. When one writes as one habitually writes it is very easy. These letters, however, are not in the writer's ordinary hand. The writing is as artificial as though you, for example, had printed a note in Roman characters. Were they addressed in the same hand?"

"Precisely."

"What was the post-mark?"

"They bore no post-mark. That is another strange circumstance. Yet they were with my mail. How they came there I have been unable to ascertain. The people at the post office naturally deny that they delivered

anything unstamped, as these were; and Barrie, the lad who fetches the letters, has no recollection of these. Nor has Checkabeedy, who sorts the mail here at the house. But each of them lay beside my plate at breakfast—the first on the fourteenth of August; the second, this morning, the fourteenth of September."

"And they were not delivered by messenger?"

"So far as I can learn, no."

"It is very odd," I commented, with feeble banality.

I took the letters from his hands once more, and held them in turn between my vision and the candle-light, hoping, perchance, to discover a watermark in the paper. But I was not rewarded.

"You examined the envelopes carefully, I presume?" was my query as I returned the sheets to the table.

"More than carefully," he answered. "But you shall see them, if you like. I found no trace of any identifying mark."

Thus far he had made no further mention of the "puzzling happening" which followed the receipt of the first letter, and in the interest provoked by the letters themselves I had foreborne to question him; but now as the words "seventh day hence" fell again under my eye, standing out, as it were, from the rest of the script which lay upturned on the table before me, I was conscious of a stimulated concern, and so made inquiry.

"I wish you would tell me, first, whether anything really did occur on the seventh day."

"I was coming to that," he replied; but it seemed to me that that prompt though his response was, there was a shade of reluctance in his manner.

Then he rose, abruptly, and saying: "Suppose we go into my study, Clyde," led the way from the dining room, across the great, imposing, grained and fretted hall to that comparatively small mahogany and green symphony wherein he was wont to spend most of his indoor hours. It was always a rather gloomy room at night, with its high dark ceiling, its heavy and voluminous olive tapestry hangings, wholly out of keeping, it seemed to me, with the season—and its shaded lights confined to the vicinity of the massive polished, and gilt-ornamented writing table of the period of the First Empire. And it impressed me now, in conjunction with Cameron's promised revelation, as more than ever grim and awesome.

I remember helping myself to a cigar from the humidor which stood on the antique cabinet in the corner near the door. I was in the act of lighting it when Cameron spoke.

"I want you to sit in this chair," he said, indicating one of sumptuous upholstery which stood beside the writing table, facing the low, long book-cases lining the opposite wall.

I did as he bade me, while he remained standing.

"Do you, by any chance," he asked, "remember a portrait which hung above the book-shelves?"

I remembered it very well. It was a painting of himself, done some years back. But now my gaze sought it in vain.

"Certainly," I answered. "It hung there," pointing.

"Quite right. Now I want you to observe the shelf-top. You see how crowded it is."

It was indeed crowded. Bronze busts and statuettes; yachting and golf trophies in silver; framed photographs; a score of odds and ends, souvenirs gathered the world over. There was scarcely an inch of space unoccupied. I had frequently observed this plethora of ornament and resented it. It gave to that part of the room the semblance of a curiosity shop. When I had nodded my assent, he went on:

"On the afternoon of Friday, August twenty-first, seven days after the receipt of that first letter, I was sitting where you are sitting now. I was reading, and deeply interested. I had put the letter, as I told you, entirely out of my mind. I had forgotten it, absolutely. That seventh-day business I had regarded—if I regarded it at all—as idle vapor. That this was the afternoon of the seventh day did not occur to me until afterwards. I recall that I paused in reading to ponder a paragraph that was not quite clear to me, and that while in contemplation I fixed my eyes upon that portrait. I remember that, because it struck me, then, that the flesh tints of the face had grown muddy and that the thing would be better for a cleaning. I recall, too, that at that moment, the little clock, yonder, struck three. I resumed my reading; but presently, another statement demanding cogitation, I lowered my book, and once more my eyes rested on the portrait. But not on the muddy flesh tints, because—" he paused and leaned forward, towards me, speaking with impressive emphasis. "Because," he repeated, "there were no flesh tints there. Because there was no head nor face there!"

I sat up suddenly, open-mouthed, speechless. Only my wide eyes made question.

"Cut from the canvas," he went on, in lowered voice, "clean and sharp from crown to collar. And the hands of the clock pointed to twelve minutes past three."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)